

Vatican excommunicates breakaway Catholic bishops who defied Pope Leo XIV

Story by Stephen Sorace

Pope Leo XIV's first major showdown with a breakaway Catholic movement ended Thursday with the Vatican declaring the Society of St. Pius X in schism and excommunicating bishops who defied the pontiff by ordaining new bishops without his approval.

The Vatican acted one day after the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) consecrated four new bishops at its seminary in Écône, Switzerland, despite a personal appeal from Leo urging the group to abandon what [the Catholic Church](#) called a "schismatic act."

In a decree released Thursday, the Holy See excommunicated the four newly consecrated bishops as well as the two bishops who took part in the ceremony, declaring the ordinations a schism, or an intentional break from the Catholic Church.

The decision comes after decades of efforts by successive popes to reconcile with the traditionalist movement, which rejects many of the reforms adopted during the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, including allowing Mass to be celebrated in local languages instead of Latin.

Only the pope has the authority to approve the consecration of Catholic bishops, a practice meant to preserve the Church's unity and its line of succession from the apostles.

The sanctions also reverse concessions the Vatican had granted the SSPX in recent years as it tried to bring the group back into full communion with Rome. According to the decree, the group can no longer validly administer the sacraments of confession and marriage, and the Vatican urged Catholics attending SSPX Masses to separate themselves from the movement.

The action comes just days after Leo made a rare personal appeal to the group's leader, the Rev. Davide Pagliarani, urging him to cancel the consecrations. "I plead with you and ask you with all my heart: please turn back!" the pope wrote in a letter to Pagliarani on Monday, warning the planned ordinations would deepen the decades-old division between Rome and the SSPX.

The dispute is the first major test of Leo's pontificate. Since becoming pope, the American-born pontiff has emphasized healing divisions within the Catholic Church, including reaching out to conservatives and traditionalists who felt alienated during [Pope Francis'](#) papacy.

During Wednesday's consecration ceremony, Pagliarani insisted the ordinations were carried out not in opposition to the pope but in service to the Church.

"We are accused of not respecting the pope," Pagliarani said. "But it is precisely because we love the pope as the vicar of Christ, as the head of the church, that we don't want to see the pope humiliated anymore, on the side of false shepherds representing false religions."

Founded in 1970 by [French Archbishop](#) Marcel Lefebvre, the Society of St. Pius X has long opposed what it considers theological errors introduced by the Second Vatican Council. Lefebvre was excommunicated in 1988 after consecrating four bishops without the approval of Pope John Paul II in a nearly identical confrontation.

Those excommunications were lifted in 2009 by Pope Benedict XVI in an effort to restore dialogue, though the SSPX never returned to full communion with Rome and has remained outside the Church's formal structure.

Despite that status, the society has continued to grow, reporting hundreds of priests, seminarians and religious members serving followers in dozens of countries, making it one of the largest traditionalist Catholic movements operating outside the Vatican's authority.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Original article source: [Vatican excommunicates breakaway Catholic bishops who defied Pope Leo XIV](#)

Retrieved July 2, 2026 from [Vatican excommunicates breakaway Catholic bishops who defied Pope Leo XIV](#)

Vatican declares radical sect in schism, excommunicates bishops and priests

Society of St. Pius X, which rejects reforms aimed at mending ties with Jews but denies accusations it teaches antisemitism, punished for appointing bishops without pope's consent

By [NICOLE WINFIELD](#)

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The Vatican responded Thursday aggressively to a traditionalist group that consecrated bishops without the pope's consent, declaring the Society of St. Pius X had formally broken with the Catholic Church. It excommunicated its bishops and priests, and warned its faithful that they too face the harshest sanctions in the church.

By declaring a schism and extending excommunications to potentially thousands of Catholics, the Vatican's doctrine office went above and beyond the minimum sanctions foreseen by the church's canon law to respond to the consecrations on Wednesday of four new bishops.

The society, known by its acronym SSPX, celebrates the ancient Latin Mass and opposes the modernizing reforms of the Catholic Church, including efforts to mend ties with Jews, which it considers to be rife with heresies and errors. While a fringe movement on the Catholic right, the SSPX has been a thorn in the Vatican's side for five decades because it claims to be even more Catholic than the Holy See.

During a ritual-filled, five-hour Mass on Wednesday at its seminary in Ecône, Switzerland, the SSPX consecrated four new bishops in direct defiance of Leo, who had urged the group to hold off for the sake of church unity. An estimated 15,500 people and their children attended, a sign that the SSPX has plenty of supporters who came from around the world, knowing full well they were defying Rome.

The harshness of the response suggested that after trying to negotiate with the SSPX, the Vatican under Pope Leo XIV had had enough.

Vatican decree targeted bishops and faithful

In a decree, the Vatican excommunicated the four new bishops and the two existing SSPX bishops who participated in the ceremony. It declared the consecrations a "schismatic act" and that the society itself had created a schism, or intentional rupture with the church.

It declared SSPX priests — who number about 750 — to be schismatic, and therefore excommunicated, and invalidated the sacraments of confession and marriage that they administer. The Vatican warned the faithful to stop going to SSPX Masses, decreeing that “those who adhere formally” to the society are schismatic and excommunicated.

The Vatican said that applied to people who are members of the SSPX lay branch and those who “regularly attend” SSPX Masses and formally share its doctrinal positions. The sanctions don’t apply to Catholic faithful who have gone to SSPX Masses “just for liturgical or spiritual reasons” or those who go but accept the pope’s authority and teaching. Thursday’s decree, however, could potentially involve the excommunications of thousands of rank-and-file SSPX faithful.

The sanctions, especially those targeting the priests, the faithful, and the sacraments they can receive, were particularly harsh and reversed concessions the Vatican had granted the SSPX in recent years as part of its outreach to bring the group back under Rome’s wing.

Marc-André Mabillard, media manager for the society, expressed shock at the severity of the sanctions and called them “unjust.”

“For us, this excommunication extended to the faithful is brutal. It’s not what we expect from a father to whom we refer every day,” he told The Associated Press. “We are told, ‘You claim to have the truth.’ Fine. I’m just saying that we certainly have our flaws, but our main flaw today is having a leader who doesn’t want to communicate with us. And that’s terrible.”

The Vatican’s doctrine chief, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, met in February with the SSPX superior, the Rev. Davide Pagliarani, and proposed a dialogue. But Pagliarani asked instead to meet with Leo, who declined but wrote a letter Tuesday begging the SSPX to call off the consecrations.

The group’s founders opposed reforms

French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre founded the SSPX in 1970 in opposition to the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

Among other things, the 1960s meetings known as Vatican II revolutionized the church's relations with other Christians, Jews, and people of other faiths and allowed Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular rather than Latin.

VATICAN CITY (AP) — The Vatican responded Thursday aggressively to a traditionalist group that consecrated bishops without the pope's consent, declaring the Society of St. Pius X had formally broken with the Catholic Church. It excommunicated its bishops and priests, and warned its faithful that they too face the harshest sanctions in the church.

By declaring a schism and extending excommunications to potentially thousands of Catholics, the Vatican's doctrine office went above and beyond the minimum sanctions foreseen by the church's canon law to respond to the consecrations on Wednesday of four new bishops.

The society, known by its acronym SSPX, celebrates the ancient Latin Mass and opposes the modernizing reforms of the Catholic Church, including efforts to mend ties with Jews, which it considers to be rife with heresies and errors. While a fringe movement on the Catholic right, the SSPX has been a thorn in the Vatican's side for five decades because it claims to be even more Catholic than the Holy See.

During a ritual-filled, five-hour Mass on Wednesday at its seminary in Ecône, Switzerland, the SSPX consecrated four new bishops in direct defiance of Leo, who had urged the group to hold off for the sake of church unity. An estimated 15,500 people and their children attended, a sign that the SSPX has plenty of supporters who came from around the world, knowing full well they were defying Rome.

The harshness of the response suggested that after trying to negotiate with the SSPX, the Vatican under Pope Leo XIV had had enough.

Vatican decree targeted bishops and faithful

In a decree, the Vatican excommunicated the four new bishops and the two existing SSPX bishops who participated in the ceremony. It declared the consecrations a "schismatic act" and that the society itself had created a schism, or intentional rupture with the church.

Pope Leo XIV leaves after a Mass where he conferred the pallium on newly appointed metropolitan archbishops, in St. Peter's Basilica, at the Vatican, June 29, 2026. (AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino)

It declared SSPX priests — who number about 750 — to be schismatic, and therefore excommunicated, and invalidated the sacraments of confession and marriage that they administer. The Vatican warned the faithful to stop going to SSPX Masses, decreeing that “those who adhere formally” to the society are schismatic and excommunicated.

The Vatican said that applied to people who are members of the SSPX lay branch and those who “regularly attend” SSPX Masses and formally share its doctrinal positions. The sanctions don’t apply to Catholic faithful who have gone to SSPX Masses “just for liturgical or spiritual reasons” or those who go but accept the pope’s authority and teaching.

Thursday’s decree, however, could potentially involve the excommunications of thousands of rank-and-file SSPX faithful.

The sanctions, especially those targeting the priests, the faithful, and the sacraments they can receive, were particularly harsh and reversed concessions the Vatican had granted the SSPX in recent years as part of its outreach to bring the group back under Rome’s wing.

Marc-André Mabillard, media manager for the society, expressed shock at the severity of the sanctions and called them “unjust.”

“For us, this excommunication extended to the faithful is brutal. It’s not what we expect from a father to whom we refer every day,” he told The Associated Press. “We are told, ‘You claim to have the truth.’ Fine. I’m just saying that we certainly have our flaws, but our main flaw today is having a leader who doesn’t want to communicate with us. And that’s terrible.”

The Vatican’s doctrine chief, Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, met in February with the SSPX superior, the Rev. Davide Pagliarani, and proposed a dialogue. But Pagliarani asked instead to meet with Leo, who declined but wrote a letter Tuesday begging the SSPX to call off the consecrations.

Nuns attend a consecration ceremony for four new bishops in a tent set up outside the Society of St. Pius X seminary, in Ecône, Switzerland, July 1, 2026. (AP Photo/Baz Ratner)

The group’s founders opposed reforms

French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre founded the SSPX in 1970 in opposition to the modernizing reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Among other things, the 1960s meetings known as Vatican II revolutionized the church’s relations with other Christians, Jews, and

people of other faiths and allowed Mass to be celebrated in the vernacular rather than Latin.

Lefebvre consecrated four bishops without papal consent in 1988. The Vatican promptly excommunicated Lefebvre and the four bishops and declared the consecrations a “schismatic act.”

Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 lifted the excommunications as part of his yearslong outreach to the group. But the SSPX today has no legal standing in the church, and with Thursday’s decree is declared to be in schism.

The consecrations had posed a crisis for Leo because the American pope had stressed the need for church unity. He has reached out especially to the conservative and traditionalist wing of the church that was in many ways alienated during the Pope Francis pontificate.

The Vatican responded so aggressively in part because the group poses something of a threat by representing a parallel, ultra-Catholic, pre-Vatican II church that has grown in the decades since its original break from Rome. While representing a fraction of the 1.4-billion-strong Catholic faithful, the SSPX now has six bishops, 751 priests, 264 seminarians, 145 religious brothers, 88 oblates and 250 religious sisters representing 50 nationalities, according to SSPX statistics.

A key Vatican II document rejected by the SSPX is one that, among other things, deplored antisemitism in every form and repudiated the “deicide” charge that blamed Jews as a people for Christ’s death. The Vatican crafted the document repudiating it as the church reckoned with the role traditional Christian teaching had played in the Holocaust.

The SSPX today says it rejects accusations that it ever taught or practiced antisemitism, and the SSPX distanced itself from one of the original 1988 bishops, the late Bishop Richard Williamson, when he denied the Holocaust.

Traditionalists in communion with Rome respond

In a note accompanying the decree, the Vatican said it was willing, “like a caring mother,” to welcome any SSPX faithful back into the fold. It laid out specific procedures for SSPX priests and faithful, by signing two forms professing the faith, promising fidelity to the pope, and accepting the core teaching of Vatican II.

While the SSPX is out of communion with Rome, plenty of other Catholic traditionalists who love the Latin Mass remain in communion

with the Holy See. They had been watching carefully to see how Leo's Vatican would respond to the SSPX consecrations and were surprised by the harshness of Thursday's sanctions.

"He's brought the hammer down," said Joseph Shaw, head of the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales, which is in communion. Shaw expressed sympathy with the plight of ordinary SSPX faithful, saying the invalidation of marriages especially is going to cause "massive" pastoral problems. "It's a sad day."

Luigi Casalini, of the blog *Messa in Latino*, meaning Latin Mass, said the excommunication of the bishops was correct because canon law provides for it. But the extension of the excommunications to SSPX priests and faithful was "an act of unusual severity," he said, while saying the invalidation of SSPX sacraments was problematic.

One of the thousands of worshippers at Wednesday's consecrations was Allison Isermann, a 24-year-old from St. Marys, Kansas, a small town with a large SSPX church. She grew up as a society member and strongly defended its teachings in opposition to Vatican II, specifically its openness to those of other faiths.

"It is actually very anti-Catholic and anti-charitable to affirm others and their beliefs when it is our duty and our mission to actually convert and sanctify the world and to restore all things in Christ," she said.

Times of Israel staff contributed to this report.

Retrieved July 2, 2026 from [Vatican declares radical sect in schism, excommunicates bishops and priests | The Times of Israel](#)